

Remarks by USAID Mission Director Erin Soto, the Women's Public Forum: Listening to Citizen

Phnom Penh
May 22, 2008

Excellency Mrs. Kruoch Sam An, representative of the Cambodia
People's Party
Excellency Mrs. Neang Chhayana, representative of the FUNCINPEC Party
Excellency Mrs. Ke Sovannroth, representative of the Sam Rainsy Party
Mr. Jerome Cheung, National Democratic Institute
Cambodia Country Director
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

On behalf of the United States Agency for International Development, it is a pleasure to be with you here today to take part in this Women's Forum. As I look out across the crowd, and as I stand here with the party representatives on stage, I get excited about the future of Cambodian politics. With this summer's national elections drawing near, it is an important time for the country. Very soon, the parties and candidates will begin active campaigning in order to communicate to you, the people of Cambodia, their platforms and visions for the future. Then it will be up to you, the voters, to decide which candidates are best fit to lead the country. Women will play a crucial role in these elections, and they are sure to play an ever-increasing role in shaping the future of Cambodia.

The United States Agency for International Development recognizes this, and that is why we are proud to support the Women's Forum program. In the two years that we've been funding these forums, the female candidates who have attended them have spoken with great confidence and skill. They have also engaged in open dialogue that has been both courteous and respectful. We hope that this will be a positive example for both male and female candidates from all parties in the upcoming elections.

In many ways, women already play an important role in Cambodian politics. In the 2007 Commune Council elections, one in five candidates was a woman. That's almost 22,000 women who ran for public office, double the number that ran in the previous Commune Council elections in 2002. In addition, 15 percent of elected commune councilors are women, up from 8.5 percent in 2002. We at USAID believe that the Women's Forums have helped spur this sort of progress, because they help develop the tools candidates need to be successful: public speaking, campaign organizing, volunteer outreach and message development.

Citizen participation in these forums has also been strong. Almost 9,000 citizens attended the 23 forums we have held in the last two years, and more than a million listened on the radio. The forums gave the people of Cambodia direct access to the political process. During question and answer sessions, citizens raised hundreds of issues important to their lives, including inflation, the rising cost of food, land rights, poverty and corruption. USAID hopes the political parties will listen to these concerns and respond to them in party platforms and policies during the upcoming campaign period. We urge women candidates to play a leading role in relaying these concerns to their party leaders.

Despite this progress, there is still room for improvement. I'm especially pleased to see all of the young women students from the University of Cambodia in the crowd, because getting young women involved in politics at an early age is a key goal of the Women's Forums. Some of the most profound issues facing Cambodia today – such as HIV/AIDS, jobs and education – directly affect young women. If the country hopes to tackle these problems, it will need the involvement of young women just like you. As more and more Cambodian women attend university, Cambodian society is sure to benefit from their skills, experience and leadership.

In conclusion, I'd like to thank the parties for their commitment to nurturing women candidates. Your work is crucial for the development of the future female leaders of Cambodia. I encourage you to keep up the good work, but I also urge you to develop even more women candidates, particularly young ones. USAID is delighted to support these forums, which help to remind all of Cambodia what many of us already know: women make great leaders.

A special thank you goes to NDI for their steady support and guidance of the Women's Forum program. USAID appreciates our partnership. Thank you all for your participation today, and good luck with today's forum.

Thank you.